

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 18, Issue 1

2018

Article 10

TRANSITION/TRANSGRESS

Listening to Label: Analyzing the Problematic Function of Origins in Historical Recording

Chelsea Adams*

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Copyright ©2018 by the authors. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is produced by The Berkeley
Electronic Press (bepress). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijcs>

Listening to Label: Analyzing the Problematic Function of Origins in Historical Recording

Chelsea Adams

***Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins.* Garcia, David F. Duke UP, 2017. 360 pp. \$27.95 paperback. Ebook available.**

Many a book has focused on the African origins of black music, but few even glance at the logic behind why there is such an obsession with proving black music's African origins. What makes David F. Garcia's book, *Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins*, unique is that it questions and discusses why Western academia has such an obsession with tracing black music's roots back to Africa. He answers his questions by examining important but less-studied figures in musicology and dance studies: among them Melville J. Herskovits, Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora, Modupe Paris, and Dámaso Pérez Prado. Furthermore, Garcia's work is notable in that he focuses on both the Caribbean and the United States to prove his argument; he believes modernity's intent to establish proof of racial equality and to create formally established norms surrounding bodies in order to create freedom for all—publicly and privately—actually damaged the cause of freedom. Garcia successfully shows through his discussions of these figures' work that academics should consider that research interests and goals, as well-intentioned as they may be, can have unintended and even detrimental consequences.

In order to make his case, Garcia bases his analysis of musicological history on the critical theories of W. E. B. Du Bois, Oswald Spengler, Frantz Fanon, and Gilles Deleuze. While his brief overview helpfully explains which concepts he is borrowing from them, those unfamiliar with the works may want to familiarize themselves with

their theories in order to better understand Garcia's argumentative progression. A familiarization with Gestalt, behavioral, and psychoanalytic principles would also be helpful in comprehending the history Garcia explains, as they underlie several musicologists' studies. Barring those obstacles, the book is an interesting and insightful read.

The first chapter explores the impact scientific studies had in the musicological quest to prove racial equality. Using Herskovits' work as an example, he tackles musicologists' need to go to Africa and obtain field recordings in the bush in order to formally establish the African origins of the Spiritual. By discussing the recording of these songs as proof of black music's African origins, Garcia demonstrates that in the attempt to prove black music's heritage, musicologists solidified the idea that Africa was a place of primitivism, a place that had not advanced since the start of the slave trade. Consequently, as Garcia states, "Historical time, therefore, in conjunction with isolated locations served as the conceptual planes upon which Herskovits, anthropology, and modern society in general mapped the New World Negro as historically and spatially distant" (31). He believes that such temporalizing and spatializing of black music and its origins is worth considering for what it says about the need for Western thought and ideological constructions to dominate discussions of other cultures and their development. Each of the proceeding chapters builds on this basic premise. Herskovits, his musicological studies, and his ensuing ideas about acculturation appear in many of the discussions later on in the book, as he influenced and worked with many of the figures Garcia chooses to discuss. Garcia shows that Herskovits and his ideological system gained enough strength to influence individuals over a large geographical region.

For example, in chapter two, Garcia discusses how Cuban music critics and scholars, such as Fernando Ortiz, built lecture-concerts to build pride in Cuban identity. These Latin American intellectuals "took the positivist view that music, as the most social, resonant, and reasoned of the arts, rendered in the most vivid way the consolidation of the nation's consciousness" (83). A vital part in building such a national consciousness was the admission of primitive African roots in the development of Cuba's musical culture. These efforts were aided with the possibility of slowing down or speeding up song playback through studio and laboratory manipulation: comparative listening helped anthropologists archive sounds of multiple cultures and push their argument that musical patterns were either biologically or culturally determined. Garcia states that the musicological obsession to prove cultural or biological origins for musical patterns proves a fixation on a Western-centered historicism and temporalization: "What seemed always at stake was their urgency in not merely listening to music in racial terms but also in delineating its racial materializations and valuations for listeners" (108). Without the distinct boundaries, the racial dualities present in Western society would be called into question, making the association of these new, popular music styles with African origins extremely important in order to keep societal norms in place.

Such a Eurocentric system hurt people of color and their progression to equality and freedom because as black musicians and dancers strove to spotlight black innovation, they utilized Western temporalizing and spatializing systems to do so. In effect, by using white historicist systems, these black artists and scholars reinforced the harmful racial binary that kept blacks segregated and oppressed. In the subsequent chapters of his work, Garcia shows that by hosting special musical events highlighting the history and development of black music from Africa to the present in both the Caribbean and the United States, people of color further solidified the belief that black innovation came from a savage, wild, and primitive underpinning that was genetically programmed (an idea that came along with musicology and anthropology's scientific focus). Such shows brought composers as well as choreographers into contact with the music and dances from different cultural groups; in turn, this gave them the ability to modify the music and dances in order to expose audiences to a range of "primitive" and modern works in an effort to show black culture's development.

In chapter four, Garcia particularly focuses on the work of choreographer and scholar Katherine Dunham. A student of Herskovits who decided to get out of academia after receiving a masters degree due to the misogynistic and racist barriers that disabled her from pursuing a career, she decided to focus on dance as a mode of anthropological learning and study rather than strictly looking at music. She performed dances she learned from the Caribbean around the US as a form of cultural outreach and understanding; however, she also understood the lucrative business she could create as a dance teacher and expert, and used sultry, sometimes inaccurate language to describe the dances she performed. As he discusses her work, Garcia points out the need to consider the ethics of taking other people's cultural heritage for recognition and profit, especially when it reinforces stereotypes of primitivism and eroticism about those cultures. The question of appropriation is a timely one to discuss, and his insights into appropriation in the age of Modernism (1930-1950) bring an historical context to why the issue matters when talking about artistic license. He further complicates the nature of appropriation, as he discusses Mambo music and dancing in chapter five in terms of capitalism, nationalism, and religious fervor.

By the end of the book, Garcia invites his readers to consider that there is, in fact, a danger in trying to historically contextualize music and dance: "The danger being these contexts' blockages that transform sound and movement from affective flow to, for example, African and European, black and white, or primitive and modern music and dance such that people are made temporally and spatially distant from each other" (270). The historical examples he traces throughout the book highlight how such an historical contextualization can take away from the original purposes of movement and music. However, he does acknowledge that perhaps it is impossible to altogether rid works of historical timeline and individual motivations and aims. Still, he advocates for a more complete look at music and dance history rather than segmenting it into groups of black and white, us and them. By changing the mainstream perspective on music and dance history, scholars and enthusiasts can be more mindful of the illusions that they engage with as they deal with the concept of origin. With an

extensive bibliography at the end, this book will be of much interest to a wide variety of scholars interested in sound studies: anthropologists, musicologists, cultural studies scholars, and critical race theorists, to name a few. Garcia's work gives scholars new tools to examine racial motivations behind music studies and discussions of music and sound, and new ways to discuss how that affects our writing, scholarly discussions and consensus, and the cultural influences of that information.